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Physical Cultural Studies: Engendering a Productive Dialogue

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One is never quite sure what the response will be to a special issue call for papers. Certainly, that was the case with regard to this Physical Cultural Studies special issue of the *Sociology of Sport Journal*. As editors, our original aim was to attract contributions that would help flesh out (pun intended), what we perceived to be an identifiable trend among the Sociology of Sport community and beyond. In our estimation, there exists a growing, if at best loosely aggregated, group of critically compelled scholars producing research focused on various dimensions of the relationship between physical culture, power and power relations, and the body: the triad at the core of the Physical Cultural Studies (henceforth PCS) enterprise. It was this fledgling PCS constituency we were hoping to attract.

Before venturing further, it should be acknowledged that we mobilize the PCS nomenclature, not as an established, commonly accepted, or even widely recognized intellectual formation. Rather, PCS is used to encompass a loosely constituted, disparately located (both intellectually and spatially), yet noticeably emergent community of scholars whose diversely-focused and enacted work is united through a common commitment toward engaging varied dimensions or expressions of *active physicality*. While routinely identified as Sociologists of Sport, these researchers are clearly not restricted by an adherence to an exclusive and limiting understanding of sport as their empirical focus, nor by an overbearing obligation to the theoretical and methodological precepts of sociology as their superordinate disciplinary configuration. Not that all, or indeed any of them, would necessarily characterize their work as PCS: that is perhaps an act of unsanctioned ascription made in an attempt to discursively constitute the preoccupations and boundaries of PCS as a field of inquiry at this moment in time.

The palpable intellectual migration from sport to physical culture realized by various *PCS scholars*, nevertheless represents the corollary of numerous inter-related trends, not least of which was a tangible yearning by many to mobilize

alternative objects and modes of inquiry. This desire was oftentimes prompted by the restrictive and disabling parochialisms of some branches of the sociology of sport, for which sport (in the narrow sense of the term) was the-be and end-all. Differently put, the roots of PCS can be discerned from the exercise, fitness, recreation, movement, health, or dance-related research of numerous scholars, whose non-sport foci and endeavors placed them on the periphery—at the very least the empirical periphery—of the Sociology of Sport community. Concurrently, and unencumbered by such sub-disciplinary baggage and expectations, physical culture (in all its myriad forms: sport, exercise, fitness, recreation, movement, health, and dance) drew increased attention from those navigating the cultural turn within sociology from the 1980s onwards. Within such a moment, the structures, practices, representations, and experiences of physical activity certainly proved natural extensions for the emergent fields of sociology of the body/embody sociology, body studies, and for researchers drawn from diverse intellectual constituencies, yet for whom the body had become inescapable (i.e., Gender Studies, Queer Studies, Race and Ethnic Studies, Media Studies, and Urban Studies). In this way, it is possible to consider *physical culturalization* (the process of becoming more attuned to and focused on physical culture as a field of inquiry), as a phenomenon occurring both within, and outside, the Sociology of Sport.

Much to our sense of gratification, and doubtless relief, it soon became evident that the initial aim of the special issue would be realized through the submissions we received. Further, it would be something of an understatement were we not to express our sincere gratitude and thanks to those who reviewed the papers in this issue. Many of these reviewers are from outside the pool of “usual suspects;” their involvement and input has undoubtedly contributed to the quality of articles in this issue, our ability to act as editors, and ultimately, on-going development of the PCS project. The articles presented herein then provide keen insights into the practices, sensibilities, and obligations of PCS’ scholarship, as understood by a diverse group of scholars nonetheless united by a desire to further the socio-cultural understanding of physical culture (broadly construed). Not that they are intended as a definitive or canonical illuminations of PCS’ concerns and complexities; such a remit would be both unattainable and undesirable, compromising as it would PCS’ intellectual vigor and relevance as a field perpetually in process, constantly being made and remade in light of changing empirical, methodological, and theoretical environments. Instead, the articles within this special issue represent attempts to capture PCS at this particular moment in time. As such, these thoughtfully and provocative contributions will hopefully stimulate an expansive and on-going dialogue pertaining to the formations, foci, and future of PCS. To such ends, Michael Silk and David L. Andrews tackle the methodological contingencies of PCS, while Michael Giardina and Joshua Newman provide an insightful exposition of PCS’ empirical focus on the active physicality as kinesthetic corporeality. Emma Rich then points to the need for a dialogic engagement between physical culture and pedagogy within PCS, while Michael Friedman and Cathy van Ingen point to the importance of PCS research analyzing physical cultural practices within, and through, conceptions of space. Holly Thorpe, Karen Barbour, and Toni Bruce then explicate PCS’ potentialities for developing collaborative, interdisciplinary, and reflexive understandings of active female embodiment. Lastly, in his Afterword, Michael Atkinson provides a suitably measured summation of the PCS project up

to this juncture, combined with a powerful expression of the necessary commitments and obligations associated with doing PCS.

When viewed individually and in concert, it is our firm belief that the articles constituting this special issue represents the most comprehensive *attempt* thus far to map out PCS, as an emergent and alternative intellectual project. Importantly, we should stress that we view PCS acting as a complement (as opposed to a competitor) to the Sociology of Sport. In our estimation, PCS perhaps best exists and operates as an overarching sensibility or framework, guided by a subjectively determined compendium of influences—such as the Sociology of Sport, Body Studies, Cultural Studies, Queer Studies, Gender Studies, Media Studies, Race and Ethnic Studies, and Urban Studies—whose precise interdisciplinary amalgamation is dependent on the physical cultural empirical under scrutiny. Thus, it is possible—indeed both current authors would self-identify—to be both a PCS exponent and, amongst other things, a Sociology of Sport scholar; hence, the complementary nature of the relationship between the two, something furthered through the productive dialogue hopefully engendered by this special issue.